

Breaking the color code of U.S. currency

By Roger Boye

Here are answers to more questions from Tribune readers.

Q — Is there any special reason why serial numbers on dollar bills are printed in light green ink? Does it protect against counterfeiting? — K.G., Calumet City.

A — When government bureaucrats reduced the size of United States paper money in the 1920s, they also established an informal color code to quickly identify different types of currency. A Federal Reserve note requires green ink for the serial numbers and Treasury seal; a silver certificate, blue; United States note, red; national bank note, brown; and gold certificate, gold.

The only major exception to the code came during World War II with bills printed in Hawaii and by American armed forces in Europe and North Africa. As you may know, the government has issued only Federal Reserve notes in the last 10 years.

Q — We have several nickels from the late 1800s. Are they still "legal money" if we were to try to spend them? — F.J., Chicago.

A — Yes. All coins and bills made by the federal government for circulation in the United States are still legal tender for their face values.

Q — Years ago I hid 25 proof sets from 1953 in my home. I didn't even open the package they came in from the mint, so I assume their condi-

tion is as perfect as possible. What are they worth today? — D.G., Chicago.

A — You have a small fortune salted away, thanks to surging proof coin prices in the last three years. Most dealers charge at least \$225 for just one 1953 proof set. Thus, your hoard would retail for nearly \$6,000, assuming the coins haven't tarnished.

Q — I've read some advertisements in The Tribune for medals made by a "leading private mint." What does that term mean exactly? — Y.A., Red Oak, Iowa.

A — "Private mint" stands for any nongovernment company that makes medals or similar metallic objects. Some private mints also produce coins for foreign governments, but under law, only Uncle Sam can make money.

Q — Please help referee an argument. Is the same Indian shown on both the Indian-head penny and the buffalo nickel? — M.K., Skokie.

A — No. Scholars believe the designer of the Indian-head cent, James B. Longacre, put a ceremonial headdress on top of his 12-year-old daughter and used her as the model. The coin he designed in 1859 survived for 50 years.

Experts aren't sure who served as models for the Indian on the buffalo nickel made from 1913 to 1938. The best guess is that the coin's designer, James E. Fraser, worked with three Indian chiefs in creating the nickel.

Q — The eagle adorning the tails side of my 1968 quarter has no claws. I'm told that the owner of a misfit coin could get thousands of dollars. What might my piece be worth? — N.H., Chicago.

A — Usually, coins missing small parts of the design are not rare. That's because dirt and grease trapped in the coin dies often keep parts of the design from "striking up" during the minting process. With luck, you might get \$2 for your quarter.